Responding to COVID-19: issues affecting services for children and young people

Briefing Note: 1, 23/04/20

This is the first in a series of briefings to share findings from our ongoing intelligence-gathering from across the children's sector around issues that professionals are seeing in the course of their work. If you would like to be involved in this activity, please contact Scott Compton at The Children's Society.

We will continue to collect, collate and analyse responses through the Coronavirus pandemic. Please help us to collect as much evidence as possible on how Covid-19 is affecting frontline children's service providers by completing or sharing the evidence collection form.

Theme 1: Reaching children and young people

"The lockdown has meant that many families who were just about coping and relied heavily on family groups, children's centres, nursery school are no longer coping and many children who are needing support are going unnoticed and undetected"

Whilst these findings are based on a limited set of initial responses, the dominant issue that has emerged so far concerns the ability of professionals to reach children who need support, with children hidden and issues going undetected whilst schools are closed. Even where online or phone services are available, there are issues around clients not being aware of them or not knowing how to access these services, lacking internet access, or feeling unable to take services up. For example, one youth worker expressed concern about LGBT young people not feeling safe to discuss the issues they're dealing with from within a 'hostile environment' at home. Another participant highlighted the unique impact of the crisis on young carers, who are "exceptionally socially isolated caring for parents and/or for siblings", with "no relief from their caring role and very limited interaction with their peers".

Smaller organisations do not have the infrastructure to run virtual services and some practitioners are being furloughed, due in part to the inflexibility of the Job Retention Scheme, which does not allow for a reduction in hours. This can mean that even where some limited contact is maintained, existing relationships between workers and children are being broken because children have to engage with people they do not know. Schools are said to be finding it "very difficult to get a sense of how well pupils are coping" at home even with robust pastoral systems in place, and staff are being confronted with a lack of engagement from the parents of those children who need support the most: "Difficult to work with children who needed a lot of support in school as the parents are not really interested".

Possible solutions:
- Urgent action and specific guidance from Government to ensure greater numbers of children with active social work cases are attending school.
- The Government's new digital support package must be delivered swiftly and provide equipment to all those who need it.
- Additional support for smaller charities for digital technology, translation services and communication campaigns.

Theme 2: Guidance and information

A key emerging issue relates to the large quantity of, often conflicting, guidance and information that is being issued by a range of agencies, local and national government and industry bodies. This patchwork of advice and guidance is confusing for both staff and young people, particularly for cases that cross local authority borders or involve multiple agencies. Several distinct, though related, issues were highlighted:

- One professional working in a school noted how because there are so many different sources of information, "it has taken a long time to identify the best". Another participant observed that they had received "Five different sets of guidance from central government, LGA, Ofsted, districts of the council and individual teams, not to mention foster carers, agency foster carers and pan-[county]".
- National guidance from the DfE is changing rapidly and "the risks of missing key changes to statutory guidance are widespread". This needs to be disseminated better, particularly for key stakeholders e.g. designated safeguarding leads in schools.
- National guidance is not always being followed or is coming into conflict with more locally issued guidance, which can undermine service governance. A social worker for a local authority commented: "Senior managers writing conflicting guidance… poor risk assessment and RAG rating, no knowledge of numbers of operational staff or planning ahead for staff who may be absent".
- Several concerns were raised over the health and safety of key workers and the families they support, including one participant in a young carer's service who was expected to continue their frontline work visiting families despite feeling unwell and worried about being an infection risk - "even though my office was closed…I was placed in supported accommodation to use their office and to also do my own job. I was in close contact with staff at the supported accommodation". Another individual was compelled to work from the office despite government advice to work from home, which they felt "put families and staff at unnecessary risk of spreading and catching the virus".

Possible solutions:
- Consider developing a central repository of guidance across all that can serve as the single point of reference.
- Updated guidance should be sent directly to key stakeholders such as designated safeguarding leads, or where this is not possible, the department should publicise a specific COVID-19 email alert service that professionals can sign up to. When new guidance is published by departments, it should always be accompanied by a summary of the specific changes that have been made so these can be more easily found.
- Clear, robust direction from the Department for Education to local authorities and statutory agencies about their obligations and the need for consistency across guidance, and facilitating a means for professionals to report instances where this is not happening.

Theme 3: Funding and the future

Financial stability is clearly a worry for many, particularly third sector providers. Charities providing services in the community will be reliant on fundraising activities that now cannot take place, and some providers that are self-employed may not be sustainable (e.g. childminding for key workers).

There is real anxiety around what the future holds, with organisations unable to plan for the medium or long term and concern around the impact on children, particularly in regards, to the loss of education and aggravated mental health concerns.

Several respondents highlighted the need for services to adapt their operating models, with greater coordination between organisations around ways of joining together and adapting to the 'new normal'. However, the funding has to be there to enable services to adapt, with recognition that additional funding to respond to the pandemic up to now has mainly been targeted at crisis provision.

Possible solutions:
- *A*dditional funding for charities for improved technology/infrastructure to provide virtual support and to adapt their existing service models around the 'new normal'.
- Existing support schemes must be made more transparent. For example, we have heard that nearly two weeks after the Home Secretary announced additional funding for Domestic Abuse charities, there have been no further announcements of how and where to apply.
- Greater clarity from central Government on the exit strategy.

Emerging issues

We have covered three key themes in this briefing, but many other concerns have been raised by respondents. We will share more information on these issues as we gather more insight. These include:

- Deprivation and financial impact on families.
- Delays with Universal Credit.
- Ongoing issues with the Free School Meal voucher system.
- A lack of PPE and testing for key workers.
- Loss of mental health services through school closures and stretched services.
- Impact on parents with mental ill-health – "the mental ill-health that was already fragile is being made worse".